Postcolonial Impressions in Jonathan Bennett's *Verandah People*

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Published between two important Australian works that deal directly with issues of postcoloniality, Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), Jonathan Bennett's short story collection *Verandah People* (2003) takes the more lateral approach of showing how the impact of Australia's imperial history permeates his characters and their situations. As such, with the notable exception of "Lyrebird," which tells the story of an Indigenous massacre, Bennett chooses not to foreground Australia's colonial past. Instead, he employs the history of colonization as a subtle motif that overlaps seamlessly with his other thematic concerns, such as emotional dishonesty, the process of grieving, and the ambiguity of masculinity (with its overlapping rituals of love and violence) in Australian culture. Across these stories, Bennett's strategy is to provide insight to the reader through the use of impressions, key moments in the narrative that, like the tip of the narrative iceberg described by Hemingway, convey meaning with far greater power than any polemic. Bennett's work is important because it shows how Australian culture, even when dealing with stories and situations apparently unrelated to its past, is nonetheless often implicitly framed by its colonial history, a point that Bennett has raised in interviews but which has otherwise received little critical attention.

The Threshold of the Postcolonial

Bennett's explorations begin with the collection's central metaphor of the verandah. In the book's epigraph, Bennett quotes from David Malouf's memoir *12 Edmonstone Street* (1985): "Verandahs are a no-man's-land, border zones that keep contact with the house and its activities on one face but are open on the other to the street, the night and all the vast, unknown areas beyond" (Malouf, qtd. in Bennett, *Verandah* 8). Readers familiar with postcolonial theory will recognize an immediate resonance between Malouf's statement and the concept of hybridity. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha famously argues that these kinds of threshold phenomena, which blur the lines between inside and outside, are crucial to the reconfiguration of the political landscape:

> So the movement of political panic, as it is turned into historical narrative, is a *movement* that breaks down the stereotomy of inside/outside. In so doing it reveals the contingent process of the inside turning into the outside and producing another hybrid site or sign…. The margin of hybridity, where cultural differences "contingently" and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience. (207)

In addition to using his fiction to explore these political zones of uncertainty and panic identified by Bhabha, Bennett himself, as both a writer and a person, is also something of a hybrid. The son of a Canadian father and an Australian mother, he was born in Canada, grew up in Australia, and has since moved back to Canada, where he began his career as a writer. His body of work reflects this dual background, both in this collection (Belinda, the central character of "The Price of Fish," contemplates her upcoming relocation to Vancouver, for instance) and more broadly in his gradual transition of fictional locales away from Australia to Canada. Bennett's stories thus encapsulate and interrogate this conceptual margin that blurs the lines between inside and outside, built as it is into his worldview as a Canadian-Australian writer.

The subtlety of this approach can be seen in his story "The Slow War Cry of Grammar." On the surface, this is not at all a story about colonialism or its aftereffects. Bennett describes an encounter between Regimental Sergeant Major Irish and his young subordinate, Hacket. Despite the apparent gravity of their names and ranks, these two characters are actually teenagers (aged seventeen and thirteen respectively) participating in a military cadet outing, a common rite of passage in Australian private schools for boys. "The Slow War Cry of Grammar" begins as a commentary on the construction of Australian masculinity, the chief purpose of these military exercises being to toughen youths into hardened young men. In the first paragraph of the story, however, Bennett shows the ambiguity of this approach by focusing on RSM Irish's feet:

> Regimental Sergeant Major Irish, tall, muscular, had not seen his naked feet for two weeks. His boots were laced tight before first light and wrenched off well after dark. The balls of his feet had not felt the hot rock and creek beds they'd crossed. His toes had not winced when they kicked an old burnt stump down by the track's end. His soft, white feet had gone spared, indirectly, from feeling. (*Verandah* 127)

Bennett hints, through this physical metaphor, that the rough exterior that RSM Irish presents to his underlings is a façade, an outer layer of

toughness that conceals an underlying emotional sensitivity. Bennett is clearly fascinated by this disavowed sense of vulnerability that, for him, characterizes the tragic flaw of the Australian male psyche, encapsulated in an earlier story as a collective feeling of "mates and strangers, all Australians together, sharing that peculiar kind of egalitarian male love, bound, loyal and cheerfully trapped in a gorgeous oblivion" (15-16). This perverse mixture of love and aggression appears again in the conclusion to "The Slow War Cry of Grammar" when RSM Irish engages in the generations-old ritual humiliation of having the younger boy sing the song of the story's title to the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers" while cupping Hacket's testicles in his hand. As with the opening, there is a contradictory interplay between hard and soft, but reversed this time—for if Hacket shows any sign of arousal in the presence of his superior, he is doomed to a future of bullying and homophobic condemnation. Ironically, to prove his emotional toughness, he must literally remain soft, and whether or not he succeeds is left tantalizingly open at the end of the story.

While this story is obviously a deconstruction of Australian masculinity, especially the painful denial of intimacy that underlies the bond of mateship, the story also takes place in a setting that reflects the "borderline experience" identified by Bhabha. In each of the stories in *Verandah People*, for instance, Bennett takes care to include references to the Australian bush, the latter seeming to encroach on the minds of his characters with willful insistence. When asked specifically about "The Slow War Cry of Grammar" in a 2004 interview with *January Magazine*, Bennett explained:

> One of the bigger themes in the book is the idea of leaving the boundary of the city, written large, or the boundary of the verandah, a kind of sheltered space, and going out into the bush. This is a place where white men suffer madness. There are many kinds of madness that happen when you're out there alone. That theme replicates itself in different stories, in a completely different way with a different outcome in each case. (Gunning)

In the same interview, Bennett connects this piece with "About Walking," the story immediately prior in the collection. On the surface a tale about a brother's repressed love for his much younger sister, it concludes with Devlin, the protagonist, wandering off into the bush, presumably to his death. Bennett continues his explanation:

> There's a great tradition in Australian literature of the bush inducing madness. . . . What happens when white man goes walkabout: well, he gets lost and dies. It would be a kind

> of madness that would need to come on for somebody who didn't have a history or tradition for doing that. It's also a comment on modern Australia and the relationship with the bush, the fact that it's there and informs their consciousness, but it's not something that they can spend time with in a very urban place. Devlin lives on the very edge of the bush and it has views and it's a gorgeous place, but as soon as he stepped away into it, and became lost, he was really lost. (Gunning)

As Devlin wanders through the bush, he meditates on the classroom strategies that his sister employs when she teaches new immigrants how to speak English, an anxiety which serves as a displacement of sentiment that, in turn, reflects the fact that for Australian men emotional directness is a cultural taboo. This reticence goes a long way to explaining Bennett's literary technique: as a product of that culture, he offers simultaneously an expression and a critique of its rhetorical reserve, so that his impressions are designed to articulate, in fleeting moments, a pain or vulnerability that is simply too intense to deal with straightforwardly. This mindset, as Bennett himself notes, reflects not only "modern Australia," but also carries with it the resonance of a painful history that stands on the liminal borderline of Australian consciousness.

Physical Impressions

There is a physicality to Bennett's metaphors that suggests these impressions are more than memories, that they inscribe themselves onto the material world—onto the land, onto the body, burrowing down into the very ontology of Australia's inhabitants so that it comes to pervade their perspective on the world. In "Alaska," the last story in the collection, for instance, Amanda dreams of escaping the overbearing heat of Australia by immersing herself in ice:

> Heat waves shimmer as if Australia is having a migraine…. Her skin is burning through her dress as if she is exposed. What I would do for some cool shade, some relief. Oh, the heat. Lay me in an igloo, lay me down on an iceberg and let me freeze to death. Yes, one day. One day I will go to Alaska and let snow melt in my mouth, pack ice around my body. There would be worse ways to go than being enclosed in ice, slowly dreaming yourself away. (Bennett 163)

In the very next line, the reader learns that Amanda has just received a letter from her older sister Jack, a character who emigrated to Alaska after falling

pregnant in unhappy circumstances in the previous story, "Light Sweet Crude." As if in response to her fantasy, Amanda learns from the letter that Jack has died in an avalanche. Bennett's metaphors are easy enough to decode—like in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or D.H. Lawrence's *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1971), these impressions of hot and cold are literary shorthand for degrees of passion and emotional warmth. The narrative interweaves the story of Jack's life and death with Amanda's memories of a landmark day the two of them spent together, when Jack announced that she was emigrating to Alaska. That day was also intensely hot, with Bennett using the metaphor this time to suggest, in contrast to the earlier stories, that Amanda is *too* emotionally reliant on her sister, a sentiment reinforced by Jack's words: "You need me gone. You do. Trust me" ("Alaska" 176). By contrast, the shift to Alaska, a move engineered by Riley, Jack's callous former lover, envelops Jack in an atmosphere of alienation that, in Amanda's eyes at least, removes her from the necessary warmth of community. Seeking some kind of resolution to the emotional imbalance that plagues both sisters, Amanda remembers the freak hailstorm that left her and Jack shuddering under the shelter of a surfboard. Already emotionally shaken by the announcement of her sister's departure, and now physically battered by a barrage of ice, a traumatized Amanda has a moment of revelation: "Jack lit a Winfield and they looked back. The hailstones. They are melting away, returning the beach to itself, but leaving a million pockmarks in the sand" (178). For those few moments, as the sisters walk back to the car, the extremes of hot and cold come together to create an instant of harmony in a landscape marked by the impression of Amanda's pain.

A similar pattern occurs in the book's opening story, "Verandah People," which begins with the protagonist, Marcus, listening to raindrops landing on the corrugated iron roof as he ponders the collapse of his marriage. Marcus is hired to paint the verandah of Mavis Crawshaw, an old woman who lives nearby in a large house known as Forby's Rest. Symbolically, his work on the verandah resembles how he is expected to deal with his emotions: "some stripping, varnishing, and a whitewash" (12). Before he starts, though, he tests the wood by inserting a nail into the verandah's structure:

> Marcus dug a nail into the wet base of the verandah's railing. With a few twists he gouged down through the years, through the coats of paint to the wood. He wasn't sure what type it was. He pushed the nail in again. A good, hard wood, though. Knew that much. (Bennett, "Verandah People" 13-4)

Bennett shows the reader through these metaphors that Marcus is a man also undergoing a "borderline experience," torn as he is between the emotional

loss he feels on the inside and the masculine, working-class exterior that he presents to the world. Bennett repeats this image of traumatized wood to characterize Marcus's state of mind on three further occasions in this story. In the first, Marcus, after dropping off his son, walks through the park toward his truck, only to be struck by the image of a solitary tree: "Marcus's eyes rested on a lone Moreton Bay fig, its thick, webbed roots like toes spread out into the sandy soil. Marcus lay down not far from it" (21). His affinity with the tree clearly derives from its sense of solitude and uselessness, with Bennett contrasting its lonely presence with a row of pines planted nearby as a windbreak. This tree is also notable for the random damage that has been inflicted upon it, with Bennett describing its "great trunk and roots etched with lovers' initials, tattooed with local rock-band names, scarred with xenophobic slogans" (21). These violent impressions are coupled with Marcus's existential panic, as he lies on the ground contemplating the waves and fighting off a bout of Sartrean nausea. While the tree serves as an apt symbol of Marcus's tumultuous inner state, Bennett's choice of species also ties it implicitly to the postcolonial. The Moreton Bay fig is a "strangler fig," which spreads by attaching itself to the upper branches of a host tree, dropping down roots, and progressively colonizing the original structure until it becomes a tree in its own right. Lying at the base of the tree, Marcus feels that he himself is being strangled: "As he lay there on the rough grass he felt something pressing down on his chest. It was dense, loud, and tall" (21). The Moreton Bay fig thus operates as a complex metaphor of both hybridity and the way that communal violence imprints itself on the individual.

The second repetition of the wood metaphor occurs in the context of a discussion about art. Mavis Crawshaw comments on Marcus's painting abilities—"You work more like an artist than a painter, Mr. Page" (22)—to which he replies that his father had been an artist, although Marcus himself had dropped out of art school. Taking a break from his work, Marcus hears Mavis calling to him for assistance: "Marcus followed a path through the garden and found the old lady trying to remove a nail from the trunk of a huge gum. . . . He took the hammer from her hands and pried the nail free" (23). As they walk back to the house, they discuss a painting that caught Marcus's eye on his initial visit. In this set of scenes, Bennett plays on the Romantic notion that art possesses a healing power, a potential emotional outlet that Marcus has given up, perhaps even perverted, by rejecting his father's legacy and turning painting into a utilitarian practice. True to his strategy of challenging easy, didactic assumptions, Bennett juxtaposes Mavis's denunciation of the nail in the tree as a "terrible thing" by showing the after-effects of her actions: Marcus "stopped when he noticed the sap. It was leaking in a fit of protest from the hole where he'd pulled the nail from the tree" (24). While the initial insertion of the nail had damaged the tree, its removal inflicts a condition that is even more painful, opening up a wound that might otherwise have

healed. Bennett presents pain, and the Australian culture of machismo that has developed in response to it, as similarly ambiguous phenomena, an uncertain trade-off between self-preservation and emotional health.

The story concludes with Marcus nailing himself to a tree, the fourth and final metaphor of traumatized wood. While this gesture clearly recalls Christ's crucifixion—it is common to substitute the word "tree" for "cross" in describing the Passion—Bennett uses these concluding passages to overlap a complex set of impressions. Marcus again picks out a solitary tree, only this time it is a gum, the trunk of which is covered in tiny scribbles. Unlike the Moreton Bay fig, which plunges him into a nauseating spiral of meaninglessness, a crazed Marcus calls out to Mavis that he finally "understands" the markings on this "lone tree" that stands out from the others like "a tattooed arm" (26). Here again the species of tree is important: the scribbly gum, a kind of eucalyptus, gets its name from the patterns left on its trunk by insect larvae, which hatch from eggs laid underneath the bark and then burrow their way out. When the bark falls off, the trails left by this incipient form of life are revealed, a symbolic juxtaposition to both Marcus's death and his questionable epiphany about the meaning of his life. Bennett masterfully intertwines the story's finale with other moments in the story—the "sweet blood that raced down his hairy forearm from where it was attached to the tree" (26), for instance, is a point of contrast not only to the sap that earlier flows from the wounded tree like "a geyser of ruby molasses" (24), but also his earlier lunch at the Worker's Club, when "egg yolk and beetroot juice leaked onto his hand and ran down his hairy forearm" (15). Similarly, the impression that, from "a distance, he seemed to be waving, or beckoning" recalls the uncertain gesture of Kevin's teacher, who was "either waving goodbye as an afterthought or unconsciously beckoning" (17), both of which provide contrast, in turn, with Judith's abrupt departure from Marcus's life. Even the wild dogs that nibble on Marcus's body are a kind of poetic revenge for the puppy he accidentally killed earlier in the story. Bennett uses these physical impressions through *Verandah People* not only to show immediate moments of pain and pleasure in the narrative, but also to demonstrate how these experiences lead to the establishment of enduring historical patterns that implicitly shape the lives of individuals, families, even whole nations.

Postcolonial Impressions

Bennett's emphasis in these stories on physical impressions thus illustrates how the past inscribes itself simultaneously on the Australian landscape and the consciousness of its inhabitants. This effect is fragmentary, unpredictable, even contradictory at times, a kind of counter-memory that recalls Michel Foucault's words in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1977):

> The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)[.]… Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (148)

Bennett's stories take Foucault at his word, from the limp body of Marcus nailed to a tree, to the torn leg of Gavin the surfer (in "Inside an Ink Cloud"), to the hailstones that pound Amanda and Jack on the beach. If there is a defining historical event that marks Australia both physically and spiritually, it is unquestionably its colonization by the British, the pervasive, lingering impression of which quietly frames the stories in the collection.

While the first story, "Verandah People," only touches very obliquely on the question of Australia's colonial legacy, "Groping Head," its companion piece, starts the process of bringing these ideas to the surface. This second story gives the term "impression" a sense that emphasizes its connection to questions of memory and reflection. Indeed, the narrator, Devlin, tells the story as a kind of memorial to his Aunt Mavis—the same Mavis from the first story—who, the reader is told, died only recently. Mavis shares this central role in the story with the location in which she lives, for Bennett imbues the story with a powerful sense of place. "Groping Head," Devlin recounts, "is a place too small for all but the most obscure, local maps" (Bennett, "Groping" 29). While the setting's obscurity is obviously an authorial trick to allow Bennett a degree of poetic license, it also connotes a sardonic designation of the area as a kind of colonial "frontier," a zone of uncertainty in which the wildness of the bush touches up against the edge of the metropolis. Bennett provides an ironic juxtaposition between this tiny haven and the early settlers:

> 'I think Captain Cook discovered Australia on this very sand,' she once said to me as a boy. Aunt Mavis told me many enormous fibs when I was a child. 'He'd have anchored on a flat day and rowed in. He and Banks would have stood right here. A day or two at least before they ever found Botany Bay.' And she marked an X in the sand with her big toe. (32)

While Mavis's imprint on the sand is ephemeral, Bennett shows in this passage how the deeper impression created by the colonial adventure on the Australian mindset is not. And yet, it is this power to reimagine the past, to shape it in an almost magical way, which is the chief characteristic of Bennett's most directly postcolonial stories.

Indeed, one might argue that the notion of subjective memory is the thematic core of "Groping Head." This idea is inscribed physically onto the location, particularly in the house and garden that make up Forby's Rest.

Mavis, who in the title story is revealed still to have "a touch of England still left in her accent" (13), is fascinated by the position that Forby's Rest holds in the family imagination, telling each generation how the house "came by its name: how my grandfather, Percy Southworth, the barrister, landscape painter and builder, spread his own father's ashes—his name was Forby Southworth—over the foundations" (37). Percy Southworth, as the reader learns earlier in the story, is an "Englishman living in self-imposed exile" whose "motivation in moving here was to capture, in paint, Groping Head's cliffs, bush, and sea" (31). While the colonial parallels are obvious—the familiar theme of an Englishman attempting to "capture" the land—Bennett turns this subjectivity around: as it turns out, it is the landscape that, far being captured, instead comes to hold its inhabitants in thrall.

From its symbolic founding on the ashes of an Englishman, therefore, Forby's Rest functions as a zone of language and interpretation, always open to change and contestation. Bennett challenges the notion that an apparatus of capture, whether it be colonial, hermeneutical, or any other variation of human control, ultimately mutates into a curious symbiosis of human and natural, foreign and native. One of the most striking metaphors of this postcolonial arrangement comes from Bennett's description of the garden at Forby's Rest:

> Forby's Rest still enjoys local fame for its garden, Aunt Mavis's garden. . . . But her garden employed its own logic. It wove its own twill of fruit and vegetables that grew around and in between shrubs and flowers; native flora and fauna competed against exotic English cousins for water and light. Because the garden was fashioned mostly by sheer chance, plants would die here and there; some of the fruit would taste sour. . . . But she knew her relationship with each plant, and it was not based on economics or aesthetics. . . . Mavis liked her garden growing just how it was meant to—linked branches reaching and playing out like lost summer conversations, single leaves breathing, turning, scattering—eventually decaying. (30)

Far from standing in opposition to nature, Mavis's garden becomes a symbolic hybrid of natural tendencies and human influences. This same ambiguous quality colors Devlin's memories of his history at Forby's Rest, where reality continually blends with imagination. He is filled with fleeting impressions that arise, seem for a moment to be eternal (his fleeting boyhood friendship with Dermott, for instance), and then disappear, erased by the waves of time and history, like the X that Mavis marks in the sand. Forby's Rest is, as Devlin describes it, "colonial in shape" with "an odd Mediterranean feel to it that is hard to put your finger on," (29) a place

that represents the collective imagination, a kind of latter-day wonderland where the subjectivity of memory can transform a reality that never really seemed all that solid in the first place.

A similar sense of magical power runs through the collection's most directly postcolonial story, "Lyrebird." In this short piece, Bennett presents the account of an unnamed narrator who is involved in an Indigenous massacre during the nineteenth century. The story begins years before the killings, when the narrator and his brother, Little Johno, were boys. Together, they played a game of hide-and-seek with a young Indigenous girl, who seemed to possess the power to transform herself into a lyrebird:

> She would appear in a shadow, then vanish in the light. Then appear once more, farther away, grinning with lit-up teeth and the light, dark. She existed as if the dark were light and the light, dark. . . . She would appear only if we were quiet. . . . If she were about, it was then she would show herself. She would appear first as a lyrebird, a blur in the bush, half running half flying. (Bennett, "Lyrebird" 46)

In a 2007 interview published in *Antipodes*, Bennett talks about how "Lyrebird," the last piece to be included in the collection, is a meditation on the problem of voice and representation. "I thought to myself, 'How can I publish and have almost no references to indigenous Australians? How do I deal with that?'" says Bennett when asked about this story (O'Reilly 31). The story's central metaphor reflects this theme, for the lyrebird is a master of imitation, able to produce realistic impressions of the sounds it hears, from the calls of other birds to the buzzing of chainsaws.

The metaphor is complicated, however, by the narrative voice that Bennett employs in this story. The narrator at the center of "Lyrebird" is the son of a European settler, but he repeatedly abdicates his authority to his father. "We'd pretend the land was our own, for it would be one day," he says at one point, adding, "so said Pa" (Bennett, "Lyrebird" 45). This point is repeated shortly afterwards—"We'd claimed our land fair. These were Pa's words" (46)—words that are repeated almost exactly by the narrator just as the massacre is beginning: "'We'd been granted this land fair,' I said to Pa as we gathered the horses" (47). Bennett is playing here on the complicated link between impression and repetition, especially the extent to which ideological discourses can be internalized. Whereas the lyrebird is like a mirror, repeating what is placed before it without those impressions becoming a part of who it is, a lack of self-consciousness that makes it immune to subjective capture, the narrator, by contrast, is emotionally torn by the events that unfold in the story. The hollowness of the narrator's echoing of his father's words, for instance, is revealed by the

latter's reaction to them: "It was then he turned to me, and grabbed me clear by the throat. 'You, son, were never in chains. You have been granted nothing.' Then, in a whisper, his spittle, hard breath next to my face. '*You* have lost nothing'" (47). In the event of the massacre, therefore, the narrator experiences a disorienting sense of dispossession from various angles—the death of his brother Johno, the repudiation of his father, and, finally, the imagined moral repudiation from the lyrebird woman of his childhood.

As with most of the stories in *Verandah People*, "Lyrebird" is a tale about loss and mourning, the key to which lies not so much in the actual, physical loss, but in the painful dissolution of a sense of self that was cherished deeply, even though it was imaginary. The death of L'il Johno, for instance, drives the narrator into a state of mad ecstasy. He depicts himself as being so alienated that, in the act of slaughter, he can only describe his state of mind as though he is observing himself from the outside:

> I followed the others around a hill and we narrowed in on a group of their women and babes. Seeing us, they ran. We shot, chased, beat. They too all fell. Did I want revenge? I do not know, even now. I were not myself, and that is all. Not human, as I cut at the air, screaming, laughing. Yes, laughing, this hoarse, gleeful laugh that I have never heard come from myself since. (49)

If the death of his brother drives the narrator into a state where he is willing to kill indiscriminately, the reverse occurs when he witnesses the corporal's cruel disembowelment of a young Indigenous woman. The glimpse of his now-grown childhood playmate urging her companions to throw themselves off a cliff in order to escape a similar fate pulls him out of his psychosis. While the story is, once again, left achingly ambiguous, Bennett seems to be suggesting that the narrator, in the final moments of the story, enters some kind of ethical threshold, even though the woman does not even look at him before she leaps.

Through this careful rendering of voice in "Lyrebird," Bennett intertwines ethics and style in order to explore the boundaries of inside and outside symbolized by the collection's central metaphor of the verandah. In "Lyrebird," as in so many of his other stories, Bennett portrays nature as an entity that enters repeatedly into the drama of human life—his writing is full of malevolent trees, ominous waves, rainfalls that promise (yet fail to deliver) fertility, and seas that yield nothing but snags. But nature's "intentions" are ultimately the product of the human imagination, the latter taking these impressions and reordering them according to a moral framework that seeks to exercise a subtle control over events. These attempts to colonize the Australian bush are frustrated by a lack of reciprocity, since

nature, lacking any kind of subjectivity, falls radically outside the realm of ethics. Herein lies Bennett's explanation for the failure of colonialism—the encounter between the imperial imagination and the Australian landscape can only come, as the narrator of "Lyrebird" puts it, from "pretend[ing] the land was our own" (45). That is why the encounter with the bush in stories such as "About Walking" is so overwhelming, for nature inhabits a place of such radical alterity that the puny attempts of the human imagination to bend this amoral terrain to its own will are apt to end in madness.

While this diagnosis seems to paint a picture of Australian life that is unrelentingly dark, a feeling reinforced by the pain and suffering portrayed in so many of the stories in *Verandah People*, Bennett does offer the reader a glimpse of redemption. The failure of the imperial imagination in Bennett's stories stems from its attempt to control, marginalize and—in its most psychotic and unethical forms—to eliminate what lies outside its purview. In the story "Groping Head," by contrast, Bennett shows the reader a new kind of imagination at work, a postcolonial mode of reconciliation that has learned to accept and embrace its liminal status. Bennett reiterates this motif throughout the story, from the geographical uncertainty of Groping Head, which is both a realistic portrayal of a small town on the New South Wales coast and a fictional invention of the author's imagination, to the fraudulent burial of Aunt Mavis, whose coffin was surreptitiously filled with books after the narrator discovered that her body had gone missing. "Death is subjective on Groping Head," writes Bennett (32). This imaginative power reaches its symbolic zenith when Bennett overlaps the story's conclusion with a painting done by the narrator's grandfather, Percy Southworth. While Southworth's colonizing desire was "to capture, in paint, Groping Head's cliffs, bush, and sea," his picture of a young Mavis and the narrator's grandmother emerging from the sea has the rather different effect of blurring the lines between inside and outside (31). "When I am writing in my diary I look up at the painting, at that beach, and it brings all the outside in," explains Mavis, "And at the same time it lets me, when I'm trapped inside, get out to it" (31). In the story's final scene, imagination and reality become so profoundly intertwined that, as the narrator watches his daughter playing on the beach, he is visited by the comforting vision of a resurrected, youthful Aunt Mavis, as though she had stepped out of the frame of Southworth's painting and into the external world of the living. In stark contrast to the majority of the stories in *Verandah People*, in which the characters attempt to appropriate, internalize—in short, to colonize—the impressions of suffering, the conclusion to "Groping Head" reveals that the right response is, as Mavis puts it, to allow "all the outside in," an attitude of acceptance and reconciliation that seems to be commensurate with the process of healing (31).

Note

1. Bennett's latest novel, *Entitlement* (2008), is as distinctly Canadian as *Verandah People* is distinctly Australian.

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